ISAS Working Paper

Need for Credible Anti-Terror Counter-Narratives:
The Bangladesh Context

Present-day religious extremism and radicalism do not target any one political party or country, nor do they favour another. These are a societal phenomenon built on a medieval narrative, characterised by a mindless anger, and have become trans-national. The most effective way to tackle this threat is to build credible counter-narratives and take a collective approach.

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The emergence of Bangladesh as an independent country in 1971 after more than two decades of Pakistani misrule and a nine-month-long bloody and brutal liberation war should serve as a potent reminder of the need to create an inclusive, democratic and participatory polity to sustain a state. The experience of Sri Lanka is yet another instance

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of the painful consequences of an ethnically divided society. For the new-found democracy in Myanmar, it is imperative to ensure that no group, ethnic or religious, be left out of the mainstream lest the politically and socially marginalised Rohingya youth become easy recruits for global extremist groups.

A Brief History

The feeling of elation that followed the creation of Pakistan after the end of the British rule in India was short-lived for the people of East Pakistan as the ruling clique in the Western wing demonstrated a systemic and cavalier disregard for their demands to be counted as equals in Pakistan's body politic. This was in spite of the fact that the majority of the population lived in East Pakistan. The easterners felt, with justification, increasingly marginalised and left out of policymaking. Observers see the language movement in East Pakistan that surfaced shortly after Pakistan's birth as the starting point of the breach between the two wings. The final nail in the coffin for the emotionally charged and politically volatile Bangladeshi was the refusal by the then Pakistan's military rulers to transfer power to the Awami League led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the crusader for the rights of the Bengali people, even though the League won a clear majority in the 1970 parliamentary elections. The rest, as they say, is history.

The birth of Bangladesh is rooted in the quest of its people for democracy, liberty, justice, respect for the rule of law, a secularised society and the freedom of expression. Four and a half decades on, however, the general feeling among the populace is that the country remains well short of reaching the goal of a healthy political culture.

Socio-Economic Breakthroughs

Grim as the political scenario may seem, the country's social indicators make impressive reading and is a source of envy for most of its neighbours. In a commentary in 2005, historian and social scientist Sharmila Bose, quoting World Bank sources, said: "Bangladesh is outperforming India and fellow Bengalis across the border in key indicators

in health, education and gender parity. If it stays on this path, in another decade Bangladeshi society will be transformed."[2]

In the economic field, Bangladesh has maintained a steady growth rate over the last two decades even in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds and recurring natural disasters. The economy has grown primarily for two reasons: vastly increased remittances from the large number of Bangladeshis working abroad (estimated to be six to seven million) and a robust and sustained surge in exports, led by the ready-made garment industry. Bangladesh is now among the five largest exporters of apparels and garments in the world. According to a study by US-based consulting firm McKinsey & Co in 2013, Bangladesh could become the second largest apparel exporter after China by 2020.[3]

In the social sector, much of the credit for the success is due to the growing practice of micro financing, or providing loans to the poor. It started in Bangladesh and is now emulated by India, China and many developing countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America as well as some developed countries. An overwhelming majority of recipients of microfinance are women. This, coupled with the fact that women constitute majority of those employed in the garment industry, has lifted a vast number of people, mostly women, out of abject poverty. It has also been key to ensuring social empowerment for women. Bangladesh ranked 39th in the 2005 World Economic Forum report on gender parity, well ahead of all Asian countries, except China and Japan, and far above all Muslim-majority countries. In the area of economic participation by women, Bangladesh ranked 18th, ahead of many countries in Europe. [4]

Higher remittances, the phenomenal success of the apparel industry and the growing outreach of microfinance have acted as agents of change for Bangladesh and significantly reduced its dependence on foreign aid. The middle class is growing and a successful entrepreneur class has emerged. Once heavily dependent on imported food grains,

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[2] Sharmila Bose: "Left behind by Bangladesh", The Telegraph, India 2005
[3] Bangladesh, the next hot spot for Apparel sourcing, McKinsey and Co, 2013
[4] World Economic Forum Report, 2005-Measuring the Global Gender Gap

Bangladesh now produces enough to feed a population that has doubled since independence and now stands at about one hundred and fifty million. Nutrition intake in Bangladesh has increased exponentially over the last decade and a half and there has been a commensurate decrease in infant mortality, thanks largely to success in crop diversity and the growth of inland fisheries and the poultry industry. All this has happened in a country where the land-man ratio defies the fundamentals of commonly held economic theories.

Such impressive breakthroughs in the socio-economic domain have not only confounded sceptics; they have given the lie to Henry Kissinger's infamous and ungracious description of Bangladesh as a "bottomless basket case" in 1974.

Nevertheless, major challenges still remain. Job opportunities for the youth and college graduates are still grossly inadequate and income distribution remains heavily skewed against the poor. Corruption and poor governance are taking a heavy toll on development efforts and eroding social values. This has caused a societal alienation among the youth with possible long-term ramifications.

Social Indicators and Politics at Cross-Currents: Pluralism Endangered

When one looks at the social indicators and the economic trends, Bangladesh can be rightfully pleased with what has been achieved over the last four-and-a-half decades, especially over the last two. It is in the area of politics, however, that the country has come up seriously short.

Bangladesh greeted independence in 1971 with a burst of idealism and hope. At its birth, the country possessed a great deal of inherent positives: unbridled enthusiasm along with a sense of euphoria that helped produce a liberal, democratic Constitution with an independent judiciary in remarkably short time. The Constitution enshrined the finest values of democratic governance, such as liberty, secularism and freedom of expression,

values the people of Bangladesh had been denied in the past by the Pakistani rulers. Despite abject poverty and illiteracy and the wanton destruction caused by the occupying Pakistani army during the liberation war, Bangladesh was relatively favourably placed for the growth of democracy. The future looked sunnier than in many newly independent, developing countries. Importantly, Bangladesh is a monolithic society.

Sadly, it wasn't long before the euphoria soured and hope supplanted by disenchantment. With the leadership unable to respond effectively to increasing political and economic pressure, adherence to liberal constitutionalism and judicial independence broke down by the end of 1974. The introduction of one-party rule in early 1975 deepened the despair.

 Between then and 1991, Bangladesh witnessed two military-dominated governments, with varying results. The regime of General Ziaur Rahman, a popular war hero, enjoyed favourable rating both at home and abroad. Noted political observer and former US Ambassador to Bangladesh William B Milam has described the period (1975 to 1981) as "A short-lived but fecund era". He described Zia's politics as one of "hope and transition".[5] However, this was also the period that saw a gradual shift from the core values of secularism and increasing Islamisation of society.

The military rule of General H M Ershad between 1982 and 1990 was not only hugely unpopular; it was also repressive. It institutionalised corruption and bad governance. It also cemented Islam in the Constitution. Pluralism was seriously endangered. Credit, however, is due to the resilience of the people of Bangladesh, for a wave of "people's power" brought about his ignominious downfall in 1990.

The rebirth of democratic rule in 1991 once again raised hopes for better days. For a time, it looked promising. Credible elections every five years saw a change of government and people by and large felt involved in the political process. The upward curve in the socio-economic area further reinforced the sense of optimism.

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[5] "Bangladesh and Pakistan, Flirting with Disaster", William B Milam

However, under this civilian façade, a poisonous, zero-sum political culture was taking shape, involving the major political forces. This was played out over the fifteen-plus years of civil political rule, resulting in a violent, heavily polarised and confrontational political culture where the only real losers were the people. Waiting in the wings to exploit the widening polarisation were the Islamist political forces, gaining strength and encroaching into the body politic of Bangladesh, sadly, with the implicit, and at times explicit, help of the mainstream political parties. This period also coincided with the rise of militant Islamic and radically extremist groups like the Al Qaeda, culminating in the deadly terrorist attacks in the US in 2001.

How Vulnerable is Bangladesh to Religious Radicalism?

Historically, Bangladesh has been known for its culture of pluralism and its history of communal harmony. The average Bangladeshi Muslim is a devout follower of his faith but never a fanatic. Peaceful cohabitation with people of other faiths has been a proud tradition. It was not surprising, therefore, that successive governments had tended to deny the rise of extremism and the presence of radical Islamic groups in the country.

However, militancy reared its ugly head in Bangladesh as the war in Afghanistan against Soviet occupation drew to a close in the late 1980s. Once the genie was out of the bottle, the threat escalated during the later part of the 1990s and continued into the new millennium. It was around that time that Bangladesh witnessed the emergence of new local extremist groups. Their hands were evident in the attacks on cultural events in 2000 and the attack on Bengali New Year celebrations in Dhaka in April 2001. Government installations and political parties were also targeted during this period.

The actions of the Jamatul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) around 2005 were particularly frightening. Countermeasures were taken. However, as recent events show, these could not deter the extremists. The series of targeted killings which claimed the life of a liberal publisher and two foreigners as well as several Sufi preachers and a university professor, among many others, the bomb attack on a Shia religious procession and a similar attack on

a church, all within a year, show Islamic extremist groups like the ISIS have their followers in Bangladesh. The failure of the law enforcers to apprehend or credibly prosecute the perpetrators created a sense of fear and helplessness.

The arrest and deportation late last year of 27 Bangladeshi workers from Singapore and the recent arrest of eight more for allegedly planning to carry out terroristic activities in Bangladesh have added yet another dimension. Besides, the re-emergence of radical groups like the JMB, widely suspected to be the local franchise for the IS, and Hijbul Taheri are worrying developments. Significantly, the 12th issue of DABIQ, the mouthpiece of Islamic State (IS), has called for an Islamic Jihad in Bengal. It can, therefore, be assumed that Bangladesh is seeing the rise of domestic radicalism and the growing influence of trans-national radical actors.

The traumatic events of 1 July when a group of five or six militant youths attacked a café frequented by expatriates in an upscale residential area of Dhaka added a new height to the terrorist saga. The attack resulted in the death of twenty people – seventeen foreigners and three Bangladeshis. Five of the attackers and a chef were also killed in the military counteroffensive early next morning. Two policemen were killed earlier in a gun battle with the militants.

The gruesome event left more questions than answers. The terrorists' profile – young, well-off and educated – did not fit the typical portrait of madrasah-educated youth. It is a new and disturbing phenomenon. This and the targeting of foreigners made it abundantly clear that the toxic ideology of ISIS/IS was no more at our gates; it has in fact intruded into our very homes. Many feared that Bangladesh had lost its innocence.

As it had done in the past, the government continued its denial of external links with this tragedy and the Home Minister went on record calling it a "home-grown" phenomenon. But while the terrorists themselves were home-grown, the ideology that drove them was not. That they were using state-of-the-art information technology to link up with players outside Bangladesh is further proof of external connections. In the age of globalisation

when geographical distance poses no challenge, international terrorist groups do not have to send their agents to each country. They can use the Internet to win converts. In this scenario, underestimating the threat to Bangladesh from these groups can be perilous. Denial is no more an option. Subsequent frightening revelations of a growing number of urban-educated Bangladeshi youths, and even families, going off to Syria to join ISIS only reinforces this point. Finding answers to this perplexing and alarming trend is not just an imperative; it is the biggest and the most immediate challenge.

The Way Forward: Socio-Political Course Correction

While law enforcement agencies need strengthening to fight against terror, politics and society also have to change. Fundamental course correction measures are needed urgently to contain the trend towards socio-political radicalism and acts of terrorism. As a first step, the culture of debilitating polarised politics has to be replaced by a healthy dose of bipartisanship. Major political parties in Bangladesh and other stakeholders need to collectively demonstrate with sincerity and conviction they can act decisively against terrorism, radicalism and religious militancy.

In this, they must commit themselves to creating an inclusive democracy and society where pluralism, justice and rule of law become the bedrock of governance. They all must at the same time renounce violence as a political weapon. Violence in the name of politics only helps extremists to further their own agenda. The need for creating a national consensus on these fundamentals has to be an integral part of the political and social discourse. At the same time, the values of democracy and human rights must be upheld in words and in deeds. The Brussels-based International Crisis Group in a recent report said, "By using force and denying justice, the Bangladesh government is providing extremist organisations an opportunity to exploit the resultant alienation and justify their anti-state agenda." The report adds, "The government needs to recognise that it is in its interest to change course, lest it fail to either contain violent extremism or counter political threats."[6] The underlying

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[6] International Crisis Group report, 11 April 2016

message here is that governments should exercise due caution so that attempts to suppress dissent do not become counterproductive.

Creating a culture of inclusiveness and giving space for peaceful dissent is as important. The tolerant, moderate, pluralistic and secularised face of Bangladesh will have to be preserved and protected with the involvement of all stakeholders in the society. Part of this process has to be a sustained focus on women's empowerment as a deterrent against religious extremism and radicalism. Bangladesh must continue to endeavour to keep its success in this area intact.

Like other countries, Bangladesh also recognises that governments alone cannot fight the scourge of terrorism and radicalism. It is important to institute a societal approach to face the threat to the country and its culture of tolerance from domestic and international terrorist and extremist groups. To tackle the threat of terrorism, it is critical to counter fundamentalism, extremism and radicalism in the society and the tendency to misuse religion for narrow personal and political gains.

Allegations, most often false, of someone hurting religious sentiments seem to have become convenient weapons to serve the evil designs of certain groups. A series of planned attacks on Buddhist monasteries and houses in Ramu in the Buddhist-dominated southeast of the country in 2012 and assaults on other religious minorities are cases in point. The recent public humiliation of a Hindu schoolteacher just south of Dhaka by an unrepentant and defiant lawmaker, no less, using the same false allegation is further proof of the spread of this dangerous trend. This must be stopped because, in the end, this gives impetus to the perpetrators and, at the same time, reinforces perceptions of increased radicalism and intolerance in Bangladesh. For Bangladesh to preserve its hard-earned socio-economic gains, it is imperative to arrest the drift towards religious extremism before it is too late. The country must unite to turn the tragedy of 1 July into a game changer in the right direction. The initial signs, however, do not give much reason for optimism. One hopes saner minds will eventually prevail.

There is also a broader global picture and the role of global stakeholders. As Syed Munir Khasru said, "It is important to look beyond the surface to understand the psyche and mind-set of desperate people putting their lives at risk in pursuit of extreme ideologies. If the world continues to turn a blind eye to the sufferings of Palestinians or the tragedy taking place in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria, where innocent civilians also die from drone attacks and bombs, it makes the task easier for radical outfits like ISIS to lure a broad spectrum of people into their fold."[7] The terrorist attacks in Dhaka, Istanbul airport, Nice in France and on a train in Germany, all in quick succession, and the ones before, are dots spread globally that all fit a dangerous pattern.

Incidents of terrorism anywhere based on religious extremism and radicalism are not just acts of violence. They are violent manifestations of a toxic political narrative. Attempts to defeat this narrative will have to be a broad-based and durable counter-narrative built on a consensus that includes all sides of the political and social spectrum. For Bangladesh, such a consensus has to be founded on the core values of democracy, good governance, justice and creating a secularised society, values that united the nation and for which so much sacrifice was made at the time of the country's birth.

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[7] Syed Munir Khasru, "Nice to Singapore to Dhaka, joining the dots on terrorism", The Straits Times, 22 July 2016